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SUBJECT: FORMER IRAQI OIL MINISTER SAYS SADDAM IS VULNERABLE

Classified By: AMBASSADOR EDWARD W. GNEHM. REASONS 1.5 (B,D)

Summary

1. (C) Former Iraqi Oil Minister Issam Chalabi told visiting SFRC Staffer Puneet Talwar August 12 that Saddam's hold is fragile, that most Iraqis believe the U.S. is serious about regime change "this time," and that they "want to see Saddam gone, preferably while they are asleep." Saddam will use the fear of chaos to try to keep his populace quiet, and the fear of mass casualties from potential WMD strikes to keep the U.S. from launching operations. Given heightened regional tensions and low U.S. credibility stemming from the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, regime change by covert means would be far preferable to a more conventional approach requiring a longer, and more visible, U.S. military build-up, according to Chalabi.

2. (C) Turning to "the day after," Chalabi argued that the Iraqi army should focus on providing order, that the on-the-ground U.S. presence should be minimized, and that a provisional government made up of technocrats, not military men, should be put in place. U.S. security guarantees will be essential in allaying Iraqi fears of possible future Iranian or Turkish ambitions. Most Iraqis, he stated, understand that their future is dependent on good relations with the West in general and the U.S. in particular. Iraq could rebuild itself "within five years" by boosting oil production to six million barrels per day, along with debt and loan forgiveness. If the U.S. does not act this time, Chalabi cautioned, many Iraqis will give up the future once and for all, and Saddam will emerge stronger than ever. End summary.

3. (C) Visiting SFRC Staffer Puneet Talwar, accompanied by Poloff, met former Iraqi Oil Minister Issam Chalabi August 12. Chalabi, who was Oil Minister from March 1987 to October 1990, has been resident in Amman since 1993. He currently is an oil industry consultant.

A Fragile Regime Dependent on Fear of Chaos

4. (C) Chalabi began by arguing that, behind all the bluster, Saddam's regime is fragile. The regime, he said, seeks to keep its own populace quiet and loyal, and the U.S. at bay, by heightening fears of the chaos and destruction that could ensue should military operations commence. Looking back to 1991, Chalabi said "he (Saddam) was spreading rumors of chaos, rumors that the intelligence services were behind. People didn't rally around Saddam because they loved him. They did so because they were scared." Although not minimizing the potential for Saddam to use WMD against U.S. forces, Israel, or his own people, he said that the regime will seek to use those fears as a deterrent against threats from within or without.

But Once It Cracks, It will Fall

5. (C) That strategy notwithstanding, Chalabi said he believes that once an operation to change the regime begins "Saddam will not be there for long. What you need to do is separate Saddam from the people, block his lines of communication to the Special Republican Guards, and then flood the airwaves with your message. If the people are convinced that Saddam has fled or is cornered, everybody will run after themselves. Iraqis think you are serious now and most want to see Saddam go, preferably while they are asleep."

Covert is the Way to Go

6. (C) Chalabi offered that a quick, precise, covert action would be far preferable to a more conventional military approach for a number of reasons. First, U.S. credibility in the region is at a very low point as a result of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, thus making the pre-positioning of large numbers of U.S. troops and material difficult. Second, Saddam would, with some success, paint a conventional U.S. military assault as "an invasion force, not a liberation

force." This would result in greater, and better coordinated, Iraqi resistance. Finally, a large on-the-ground U.S. presence "would begin to look like an occupying force after a while. You don't want this."

The First Day After: An Immediate Need for Order and Calm,
And U.S. Security Guarantees

17. (C) In this immediate "day after" environment, it will be critical, Chalabi argued, that the Iraqi people be reassured that order and calm will prevail and the country will not fall into chaos. The Iraqi Army should focus on this task, not overall governance, Chalabi said. Rather than military rule, "a provisional government of technocrats should be installed." (Note: Chalabi declined to identify anyone specifically who should be included in such a government, and recognized the difficulties of such a task. In his view "the Iraqi opposition outside the country has no real constituency and there is no Karzai. Saddam has gotten rid of anybody who even had that potential." Chalabi also dismissed the notion that there is any significant nostalgia for restoration of Hashemite rule either.)

18. (C) In addition to internal order, Iraqis will also want immediate reassurance that their national sovereignty will be protected: "People understand that their future lies with the West in general, and the U.S. in particular. You (i.e. the U.S.) don't need to be there physically, but they need to know that you will support them against Iranian or Turkish ambitions."

Iraqis Must Think of Themselves as Iraqis First

19. (C) Peering further down the road at a post-Saddam Iraq of the future, Chalabi said that "the question of federalism needs to be looked at closely." Five to seven regional governments would be feasible, he offered, including one for the Kurdish areas. That said, for the most part these divisions should not fall along ethnic lines: "People need to think of themselves as Iraqis first." Future leaders should work to include members from all groups in their governments, but "somebody should not be hired because he's a Kurd or a Shiite, or whatever. To follow the Lebanese model would make matters worse and would be a constant source of instability for years to come."

Reconstruction: Oil and a Bit of Debt Forgiveness

10. (C) Turning to the longer term aspects of Iraqi reconstruction, Chalabi struck a very positive chord, predicting that, under the proper conditions, the country "could rebuild itself in five years." Iraq, Chalabi said, "could go to 6 million barrels per day easily. I had that plan in 1990." Increased petroleum revenues, along with forgiveness of some Iraqi debts and loans, would hasten Iraq's reintegration into the international community.

It's Now or Never

11. (C) As the meeting drew to a close, Chalabi made clear that, in his view, the time had come for the U.S. to rid Iraq of Saddam. If that does not happen, and the U.S. continues with a policy of containment, "we will all feel disheartened, disenchanted, and that there is no hope for our country. People will believe that Saddam really does have some special power and that he is here for good. There should be an ultimatum from the Security Council about the return of the inspectors. When they go back in, I'm sure they will find things Iraq should not have. You need to have the support of the international community, and you need to deal with this problem now, before new (internal) problems arise in Saudi Arabia or Kuwait and make the prospect of regime change in Iraq even more complicated."

Gnehm